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To cite this article: Attila Szabo & Levente Buta (2019): Sport-selfies: Characteristics and differences in gender, ethnic and national origin, type, form, and milieu of sports, *Loisir et Société / Society and Leisure*, DOI: [10.1080/07053436.2019.1625643](https://doi.org/10.1080/07053436.2019.1625643)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07053436.2019.1625643>



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Published online: 24 Jun 2019.



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Sport-selfies: Characteristics and differences in gender, ethnic and national origin, type, form, and milieu of sports

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(Received 4 January 2018; accepted 22 May 2018)

Selfie posting on social media is a modern-day phenomenon. There are over a thousand academic articles on selfies, but sport-selfies have not been examined to date, even though they might have a ‘positive message’ in popularizing sports and exercise. This exploratory work assessed the nature and origin of sport-selfies. After a content analysis of 930 random sport-selfies, it emerged that while sports are dominated by men, women post more sport-selfies than men. Over 90% of the posts portray adults who present themselves in individual and recreational sports. Outdoor and land-based sport activities are the most frequent. In contrast to research on selfies in general, sport-selfies are primarily posted by White individuals. Most sport-selfies originate from three nations: Germany, Brazil, and Russia. Images linked to body conditioning are the most popular. It appears that sport-selfies are culture, gender, and sport specific. The present results may stimulate interest in determining the reasons behind them.

Keywords: athlete; exercise; fitness; physical activity; social media

Poster des égoportraits (selfies) sur les médias sociaux est un phénomène moderne. Il y a plus de 1 000 articles académiques sur les égoportraits, mais ils n’ont pas été examinés à ce jour, même s’ils pourraient avoir un message positif dans la popularisation du sport et de l’exercice. Ce travail exploratoire a évalué la nature et l’origine des égoportraits sportifs. Après une analyse de contenu de 930 égoportraits sportifs, il est apparu que même si les sports sont dominés par les hommes, les femmes affichent plus de égoportraits sportifs que les hommes. Plus de 90 % des égoportraits ont montré des adultes qui se présentent dans des sports individuels et récréatifs. Les activités sportives extérieures et terrestres sont les plus fréquentes. Contrairement à la recherche sur les égoportraits en général, les égoportraits sportifs sont principalement affichés par des Blancs. La plupart des égoportraits sportifs proviennent de trois nations : l’Allemagne, le Brésil et la Russie. Les images liées au conditionnement du corps sont les plus populaires. Il semble que les égoportraits sportifs soient spécifiques à la culture, au genre et au sport. Les résultats actuels peuvent stimuler l’intérêt pour déterminer les raisons derrière eux.

Mots clés : activité physique; athlète; des médias sociaux; exercice; forme physique

A ‘selfie’ is ‘an image of oneself taken by oneself using a digital camera especially for posting on social networks’ (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2017). In the current work, a selfie is conceived as a digital self-photo that is *shared* on a social medium. Selfies that

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are not shared publicly are not part of the current article. However, since private and shared selfies may only be distinguished by the act of sharing, researchers are challenged to differentiate between private selfies and public selfies, the latter being the subject of scholarly works, including the current report. Public selfies originated centuries ago. Artists drew self-portraits that later became collectors' items, while by the end of the twentieth century, with the evolution of photography, artists started to devote increasingly more attention to their own bodies in their visual art works (Rettberg, 2014). With the constantly carried digital mini-technologies, like camera-equipped smartphones, the taking of self-photos in any situational context became an instantly rewarding self-enhancing opportunity (Frosh, 2015; Goffman, 1959) by generating immediate rewards through 'likes' and comments on social media (Frosh, 2015) when shared with others.

Motivation for taking selfies can be described by considering the self-presentation theories. For example, in a dramaturgical framework, Goffman (1959) argued that people have many reasons to bias others' impression about themselves, which leads to theatrical maneuvers in creating a *desired impression*. The selfie taken and subjectively perceived as *self-enhancing context* then is shared with others on social media (Frosh, 2015). The act of sharing may reflect self-enhancing behavior, but in certain cases the posting of selfies may have more 'promotional' than self-enhancing aims. Research shows that social attractiveness could be the principal motivation for posting selfies (McCain *et al.*, 2016). A recent report revealed that four key motives behind posting selfies on social media are: (i) attention seeking, (ii) communication, (iii) archiving, and (iv) entertainment (Sung, Lee, Kim, & Choi, 2016). However, the extant literature projects a wider motivational spectrum for posting selfies on social media, ranging from mental disorder (Singh & Tripathi, 2016) to enhancing mental health (Wallace, 2014). Knowing the nature, as well as origin, of selfies could lead to hypotheses about personal and motivational factors.

Williams (2014) revealed that Black and Latino individuals produce more selfies than Caucasians (White people). Further, women appear to post more selfies than men (Sorokowska *et al.*, 2016; Sorokowski *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Souza *et al.*, 2015) and there are nationwide variations too (Souza *et al.*, 2015), as one could predict on the bases of socio-cultural and perhaps techno-developmental differences between various nations of the world. Finally, the theme (subject) of the selfie is an important aspect of the message the user wishes to convey.

It is unknown whether the most popular sports would be reflected in the theme of selfies. For example, based on a survey of tens of thousands of people in the UK it was found that swimming and diving were the most popular sports followed by various health and fitness activities (Jones, Millward, & Buraimo, 2011). This large-scale survey also revealed that there was a relatively equal division between the 10 most popular sports with regard to the activity place (i.e. indoor and outdoor). Although this study may not be representative worldwide, it is of interest to examine whether there is a parallel between its results and trends in posting sport-selfies.

The theme of the selfies may reflect the relative importance of the action to the person; love and intimacy-related selfies are relatively common (Sabiniewicz, Borkowska, Serafińska, & Sorokowski, 2017), and so are selfies taken during travel (Lyu, 2016). On the social media there are many selfies taken in sports or physical activity contexts. The characteristics of these selfies, forming a ground for psychological and social research, were not investigated to date.

The objective of the current work was to fill this gap and determine whether gender and cultural trends also occur in sport-selfies and investigate which is the most popular

type of sport or physical activity as subject of the posed selfies. We were also interested in possible differences between team- and individual sports, competitive versus recreational sports, outdoor and indoor sports, and physical milieu of sports, such as dry land, water, or air. Since new research insights suggest that men are more interested in sports than women are (Deaner, Balish, & Lombardo, 2016), we posed a contrary hypothesis to what the current empirical evidence suggests and forecasted that sport and/or physical activity-related selfies will predominantly be posted by men. Further, based on Souza *et al.*'s results (2015) we also hypothesized that sport-selfie posting will not be proportional with a nation's number of Internet users (Internet World Stats, 2017). We expect that the results of this work will provide a ground for deeper research efforts (i.e., psychological and social determinants of sport-selfie posting) in the understanding of the messages that sport-selfies convey.

Method

Quantitative content analysis is an appropriate method for analyzing media content (Riff, Lacy, & Fico, 2014). Therefore, a content analysis of 930 selfies, selected from slightly over 12,000 selfies, using a double-format randomization method (1/10 for the first and 1/5 for the second half¹) from Instagram '#sportselfie' was carried out between October and December 2017. A new account was created specifically for the purpose of the current research. This medium was selected because it focuses specifically and exclusively on sport-selfies. Instagram is a digital photograph-sharing website on which information is shared by publicizing a picture labeled with a title and with one or more hashtags (Moreno, Ton, Selkie, & Evans, 2016). The '#' symbol before a word (i.e. 'sportselfie') represents a hash and refers to the main topic of the pictures posted on that social medium. Pictures of self (selfies) which could not be clearly identified as taken in a sport and/or physical activity context, and those with more than one person in them (that is, not a selfie by definition) were excluded. In such cases, the next selfie in the randomized sequence was used instead. The selfies were coded for gender, ethnic background, life-stage (child, adult, or elderly), country of its origin, type of sport or physical activity, form of sport (competitive or recreational and individual or team), venue of sport (indoor or outdoor), and milieu of sport (dry land, water, or air). The selfies were checked by two investigators and those that were equivocal (99% inter-rater agreement) were eliminated. From 1001 randomly collected selfies 930 were retained for the final analyses. Initially the data were recorded in an MS Excel file then imported into an SPSS data file for statistical analysis. To determine the statistical differences between the various categories the non-parametric Chi-square test was used. The level of the statistical significance was set to alpha (α) = 0.05.

Results

A total of 930 self-taken pictures of individuals in sport and/or physical activity situations were analyzed.² The results showed that in contrary to the posed hypothesis, women posted more sport-selfies than men ($\chi^2(1) = 11.63$, $p = .001$, effect size, Cramér's $V = 0.11$). The selfies were almost exclusively posted by adults (those who could be clearly identified as being over 18 years of age; $\chi^2(1) = 902.07$, $p < .001$, $V = 0.97$), less than 1% were posted by children and/or adolescents (0.44%), and there were no selfies posted by elderly people. As expected, the rate of postings differed among countries of origin ($\chi^2(46) = 3032.93$, $p < .001$, $V = 0.07$), with three countries dominating the sport-selfie posts (Germany 24.6%; Brazil 23.7%; Russia 13.5%), and all other countries were represented under 5%. The type of sport

depicted by the selfies also differed significantly ($\chi^2(44) = 6618.93, p < .001, V = 0.15$), with four sports dominating the selfie posts (body conditioning 38.8%; running 14.4%; green exercise [i.e., outdoor activities] 10.1%; cycling 10.0%), while all other sports were represented under 5%. Caucasians (White people) posted most sport-selfies (91.42%), a significantly greater number than the posts by representatives of other ethnic origins ($\chi^2(3) = 2103.90, p < .001, V = 0.75$). Over 90.0% of the posts originated from individual versus team sports and mixed sports (i.e., tennis) ($\chi^2(2) = 1384.33, p < .001, V = 0.74$) and over 91.0% of the posts were from recreational (leisure) sports in contrast to less than 9.0% in competitive sports ($\chi^2(1) = 642.64, p < .001, V = 0.69$). Slightly, but still statistically significantly ($\chi^2(1) = 4.27, p < .039, V = 0.01$), outdoor selfies outnumbered (53.39%) posts from an indoor context (46.61%). Finally, the land-based sports dominated the theme of the 930 selfies ($\chi^2(2) = 1121.67, p < .001, V = 0.60$). A visual summary of the results is presented in Figure 1.

Discussion

The current study is the first to examine sport-selfies that could reveal information about the reciprocal relationships between people and sports and physical activities. While the results may not be representative, they strongly demonstrate that Caucasians post the most selfies, which primarily emerge from individual-recreational rather than competitive settings. Strong evidence has also emerged for land-based sports' popularity mainly in adult posters. Weaker evidence suggested that women post more selfies than men, and that people in some nations, and those practicing specific sports, tend to dominate the sport-selfies on Instagram.

In contrast to one of the research hypotheses of the current study, the findings reveal that in posting sport-selfies on social media women still outnumber men. Thus, albeit the relatively well-justified argument that men are more interested in sports than women (Deaner *et al.*, 2016), it appears that in accord with past *non-sport* research (Sorokowski *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Souza *et al.*, 2015; Tifentale & Manovich, 2015), women are keener on posting and sharing selfies than men. Our results indicate that this trend is also prevalent in the context of sport-selfies. Consequently, interest in sports and posting of sport-related selfies may be uncorrelated, which is a hypothesis that merits specific evaluation in future research. For women practicing sports, posting selfies may be a good opportunity for self-enhancement (McCain *et al.*, 2016) and for strengthening self-esteem through (expected) positive social feedback and appraisal (Pounders, Kowalczyk, & Stowers, 2016). Posting sport-selfies by women, therefore, might be considered a 'healthy' action/investment – an expected results/recognition cognitive pairing based on expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964).

In accordance with past research, most sport-selfie posters were adults (definitely agreed to be between 18–60 years old). Earlier research showed that young people were more likely to post selfies than older people (Dhir, Pallesen, Torsheim, & Andreassen, 2016; Qiu, Lu, Yang, Qu, & Zhu, 2015). Despite being in accord with the general trend, actual age was not assessed in the current work. Still, based on 'definitive' age groups, we found less youngsters (under 18 years; 0.44%) posting sport-selfies than the study by Dhir *et al.* (2016) which reported that adolescents posted more selfies than young adults, who in turn posted more selfies than older adults. While adolescents may publicly share more personal information compared with older individuals, posting of selfies may be more closely related to the development of emotional intimacy, sexual identity, and romantic relationships (Arnett, 2004) rather than sport activities.

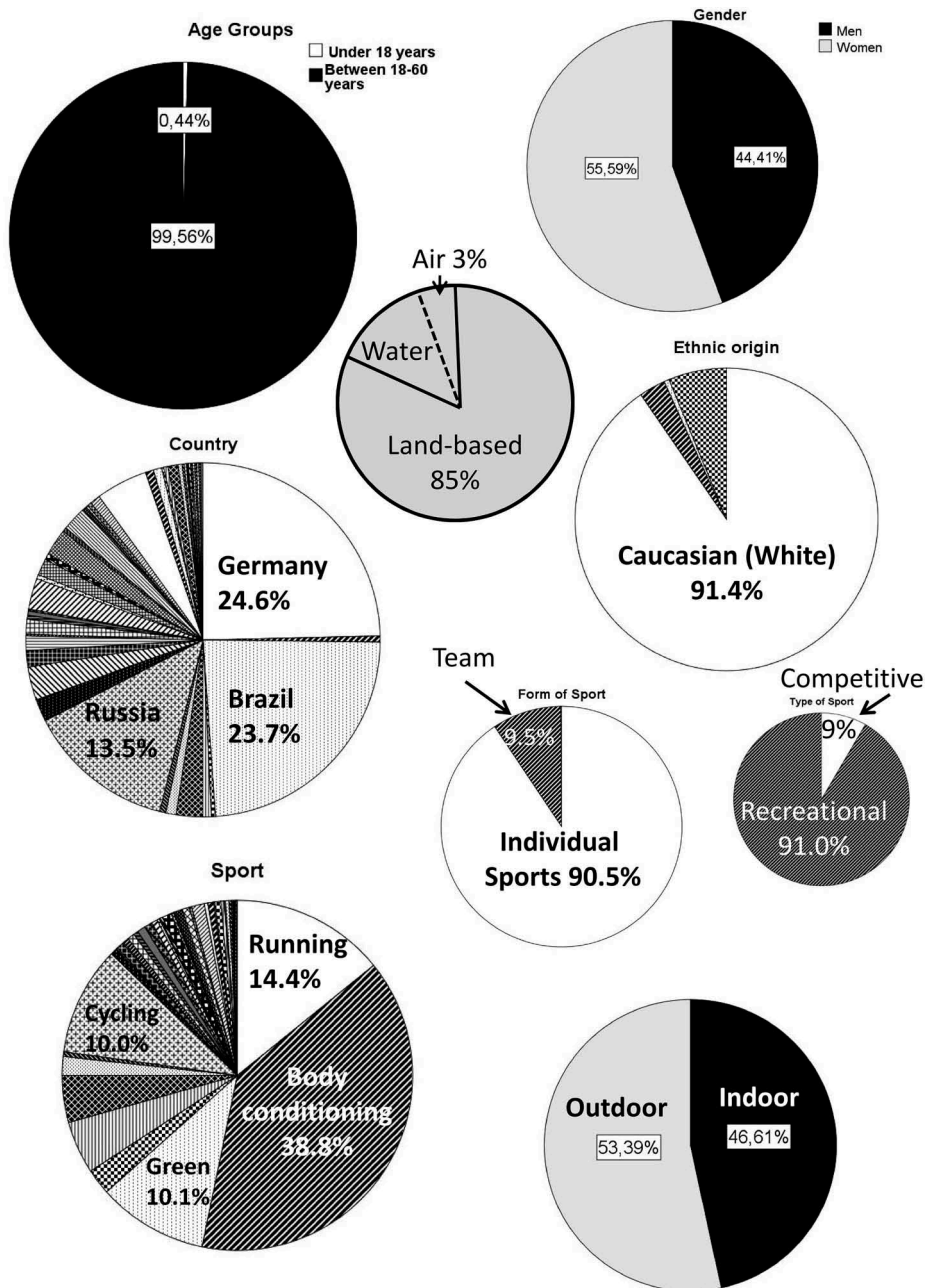


Figure 1. Characteristics and proportions in various categories of 930 randomly selected sport-selfies. All frequencies are statistically significant ($p < .05$) based on Chi-square tests.

In contrast to past reports that Black and Latino people post selfies more frequently, and also approve more selfie posting than White individuals (Williams, 2014; Williams & Marquez, 2015), the sport-related selfies appear to be dominated by Caucasians. A diversity in selfie gratification and the uniqueness/specificity of sport-selfies may be a still unexplored

explanation behind these results. It is possible that sports ability and its social evaluation of the black ethnic groups (Clark, Smith, & Harrison, 2014) translate into generally perceived superiority which needs no further external reassurance, so this group posts more selfies on other themes in contrast to Caucasians who search for positive athletic/sport evaluations.

We found that the bulk of sport-selfies came from three nations, Germany, Brazil, and Russia. While these nations are indeed among the top 20 countries with the highest number of Internet users (Internet World Stats, 2017), they are not the first three in ranked order (which are China, India, and the United States), thus our hypothesis, as based on Souza *et al.*'s (2015) results, was supported in that sport-selfie posting was not proportional with a nation's number of Internet users. This behavior merits systematic cross-cultural scrutiny, since socio-cultural factors, norms, and popularity of sport in various nations might all contribute to the observed differences.

The four most common sport-selfies that emerged in the study were contextually linked to body conditioning (i.e., more than one-third of all), running, green exercises, and cycling. While green exercises (i.e., outdoor activities), cycling, and running precede body conditioning in a ranked order (Physical Activity Council, 2017), the physical presentation in the aesthetic context of body conditioning may not be solely related to sport and exercise, but also to one's body presentation that might lead to positive feedback, reassurance, self-esteem (Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015), and motivation in adherence to the activity.

Individual recreational sport activities dominated the selfies by over 90%. While no past research examined sport, especially the type and form of sport, in selfies, this domination is somewhat inherent in the individual nature of the selfie. So, these results could be expected, because one is more likely to take a selfie when performing a physical exercise alone. Further, control, in terms of choice of the most appropriate (or thought to be the best) moment, action, and background, is greater in recreational than competitive sports/exercise and, therefore, it is not surprising that the former dominates the selfie posts.

There was an almost equal prevalence of outdoor and indoor sport-selfies, but still the former outweighed the latter. However, when examining the effect size, despite statistical significance, the differences were so minimal that theoretically they could be considered as meaningless. These findings might be related to numerous factors, including travel, the beauty of nature, an extreme or unusual location, and many more. It could also be related to a message that the person wishes to convey. Further, as one may expect, land-based activities were the most popular, followed by water-based then air-based activities. This order is prevalent in the practice and worldwide availability of sport choices too. However, selfies do not follow common trends in sport and/or popular places as also illustrated by the fact that bodybuilding selfies outnumbered those reported to be more popular individual sports (Jones *et al.*, 2011).

Limitations

While the current study provides a primer into the characteristics of the sport-selfies, it has certain limitations. One is that we cannot assume that posts on the examined Instagram group are representative of the worldwide population using social media. The other is that age and ethnic origin were based on facial examination and raters' agreement (however, the results for age and their interpretation would not change even if there were a 10% margin of error, which is unlikely to be the case since we used the 'definitely' criterion). The third, over which the authors had no control, is that the nation of origin of the selfie could be disclosed only for slightly more than half of the pictures.

Therefore, data on national origin are based on a lower sample size than the full data set with the implicit assumption that it could reflect the whole sample's national presence.

Conclusion

The current study suggests that sport-selfies are a unique category of self-presentation in social media. While it is accepted that today sports are still dominated by men, women post more sport-selfies than men. The sport-selfies are posted by adults, between 18–60 years old and children/adolescents (under 18 years) appear to post less than 1% of sport-selfies. Over 90% of sport-selfies depict individual-recreational activities; more than half of these reflect an outdoor event that is primarily land based. In contrast to the average, or more general, selfie posts examined in past research, it was shown that Caucasians post more sport-selfies than Asians, Blacks, or Latinos. Most of the sport-selfies appear to originate from three nations, in order: (1) Germany, (2) Brazil, and (3) Russia. Sport-selfies appear to be dominated by four sport/exercise activities, in order: (1) body conditioning, (2) running, (3) green (outdoor) exercise, and (4) cycling. Sport-selfies seem to represent a relatively unique category of public self-presentation(s) that ought to be examined separately from those falling under a general umbrella of selfies. Their psychological antecedents and social consequences merit systematic research effort in future scholarly works to better understand how the messages are received and interpreted in society in general.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. We aimed at gathering 1000 selfies, based on retrospective data collection, which seems to be an appropriate and representative number in this type of content analysis (White & Marsh, 2006). However, half way through the study by using 1/10 randomization we realized that unless we reduce the ration we will not get the targeted number of pictures. Therefore, after 500 selfies we considered every 5th instead of every 10th selfie in the sequence from the available pool of slightly over 12 000 selfies.
2. The pictures are available upon request.

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